

THE CULTURE CONUNDRUM: CLASSROOM CHALLENGES IN THE ASIAN MILLENNIUM

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Abstract: “Those who know nothing of foreign languages know nothing of their own.” Johann W Goethe. This study will aim to highlight the importance of learning, understanding and assimilating cross cultural awareness and developing tolerance towards other cultures and cultural mores in the context of a technological explosion through the use of cyber-media and globalization. Firstly the importance of cultural understanding in an era of Free Trade Agreements (FTA) and how institutions and organisations will need to reinvent themselves will be discussed. This is necessary in order to become more competitive in order to survive in a world dominated by the emergence of Asian Economies as Powerhouses, given the economic recovery in Asia, much faster than in the West with more V shaped countries; which has led the west to use the term, Asian Millennium and the significance of the G 20 summit rather than the G8 of the past. The next focus will be on how the paradigm shift in business models has morphed, the example of “Lenovo” and “Siemens” models will be highlighted, where business no longer happens to be a brick and mortar industry where money alone matters. What matters more now is how businesses can realign their models to become more competitive as the challenges of globalization pose more demands on businesses and their ability to adapt to cross cultures and tune themselves. This study will argue that understanding cultures better and developing business models based on cross cultural awareness and tolerance will be the keys for both educational institutions and global corporations alike to succeed in the Asian Millennium and for the west to be aware of Asian cultures now!

“No culture can live, if it attempts to be exclusive.” Mahatma Gandhi

In fundamental ways, the forces of globalization challenge the previous approaches and theories of development. In the minds of some observers, globalization is an exaggerated form of global capitalism; in the view of others, it is a wake-up call to look for alternate forms to the new social and cultural contexts which dictates the era of globalised education, primarily dominated by the use of technology where cultural arrangements are being spontaneously generated by the advent and reality of globalization.

A Global Village and Global Culture

Cultures and national identities have always had an impact on the learning process globally; such as eye contact is never established by both the Japanese as well as the

Koreans, whereas it controls the flow of communication for the Americans as well as for most other people across cultures globally. This is the Asian Millennium and culture is indeed changing; albeit slowly as it always does, but the paradigm shift is discerningly evident and visible as it shifts east ward. Businesses across the world now tend to focus more now in understanding cultures as the maxim of “Think global and act local”, seems to sink in to the business as their watchword, as is evident from the example of Mc Donald’s which has dispensed with its customary store greeting with the Hi with the Wai in Thailand, as well as their offering of the Aloo Tikki (potato burger) in all their Indian outlets to satiate a largely vegetarian section of their customers. Cultural mores and beliefs not only relate to social values and traditions but go beyond it. “Culture is like the sum of special knowledge that accumulates in any large united family and is the common property of all its members. When we of the great culture family meet, we exchange reminiscences about Grandfather Homer, and that awful old Dr. Johnson, and Aunt Sappho, and poor Johnny Keats” stated Aldus Huxley.

Gone are those days when the big 3 as they were known including GM, Ford and Chrysler were the best sellers of cars globally and in the US. Now it is Toyota which is the market leader and has the left the big 3 by the wayside and also in the luxury segment, it is not Mercedes Benz or BMW which is the leader; it is Lexus from Toyota, which is the best seller in the USA. While Japanese companies have long been a cynosure of people worldwide, it also has for company more and more Asian brands from China, India, Korea and PTT from Thailand.

While CHINDIA has been setting the stage globally in most areas including recovery from the global financial crisis through a V shaped recovery as against a W shaped recovery pattern for the West, these countries both China and India have been handling their exponential growth machines rather well with both countries having people with net wealth in US dollars as billionaires in Forbes’s list of the world’s richest.

If these two Asian powerhouses have their skills in manufacturing and technology respectively, another Asian tiger, Korea is not to be excluded from the pack! Its global juggernauts led by Samsung and followed by LG, Hyundai and Daewoo are also marketing themselves into all the markets globally. Korea is incidentally one of the world’s most wired countries, with a mobile phone penetration which is greater than 1:1, with more number of phones in the country than the population!

A few years back at the turn of the century, people were laughing, even in my classes when I told my students that Sony would lose its leadership to Samsung which was not a brand worth reckoning then. Now the tables are turned and truly changed and Samsung is way ahead of Sony which is fighting death! Well, how did this happen and how did Samsung win the battle of the giants?

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Samsung was re-inventing itself and adapting itself through innovation and by learning to put itself at the forefront of a globally changing culture, trying to fit into every culture and identifying itself with that culture, whereas Sony was resting on its laurels and slowly saw that the carpet under its feet had vanished! We need to understand the need to perpetually develop a culture of looking at change and being flexible to change the structure and also by anticipating changes.

Then let us explore the ADIDAS/REEBOK merger. These two global brand leaders who had been arch rivals for ages from two continents with completely different cultures have merged and it is now the German company ADIDAS which will control the American giant REEBOK and not vice versa!!!

Let us examine how the gear shifts further towards Asia.

“Culture is an instrument wielded by professors to manufacture professors, who when their turn comes will manufacture professors”. Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (1949)

IBM, the creator of the original PC in 1981, has sold its entire computer manufacturing business to a less known Chinese assembler Lenovo, which was formerly called Legend computers before the deal was consummated a few years back. Lenovo paid the big blue in mostly cash for the deal when an American icon was bought by a Chinese company; what a grand shift in cultures! Then Indian BPO's offer most of the back office operations for major EU and US manufacturing companies including: GE, BMW, NIKE, FORD, NOKIA, SIEMENS, TESCO and a host of others, which is also a cultural shift brought about by globalization as Asians learn to assimilate knowledge and understand global cultural changes better.

The advent of the ICT era and borderless classrooms and offered through online and distance learning modules have made a mockery of both the educational institution in a traditional sense and the value of the teacher as well thus making the global village even smaller

Global Cultures and Globalization

To put it bluntly in the words of Murphy and Iverson (2003); “Thinking cannot be understood apart from the context it appears”. There is no hegemonic (one size fits all) pedagogy, simply because learning takes place most often embedded in differing cultural contexts from which it has been experienced and assimilated. Then, is there a global culture? The answer is a yes and a no. What do I mean by a yes; today, most teenagers across the world enjoy chatting on the computers through a myriad of sites and mail providers besides the new rage of SNS (Social Networking Sites) which is also evident from the success of people drinking at Starbucks and eating at McDonald's in China, India and Thailand, which I call a global culture. Next, allow me to share with you a classroom example which came from a 168Kg Iranian student who had this to

offer; One Chinese student felt that America had a very high rate of divorce which meant that people changed partners more frequently than would most Asians, which even though is now changing, but, still not considered to be either very moral or an acceptable cultural context in most of Asia, when the Iranian said “That's good...only for that I like American culture, I can have many women!!” At this point I asked him; well you say that it is good to have many women, let's assume that your first and legally married wife has an extra-marital affair with another man...what would you then do? He replied, “Kill her!” which goes to prove that there is no global culture and that culture is indeed changing slowly.

Cultural Aspects of Globalization

“Culture is but the fine flowering of real education, and it is the training of the feeling the tastes and the manners that makes it so”, Minnie Kellogg.

Several elements, such as global media (BBC, CNN and a host of other cable and satellite TV channels, , the Internet), commercial culture (McDonald's, Nike, Starbucks) increased mobility including tourism, international sports and changes in technologies to name a few influence the cultural aspects of globalization.

A UNESCO document “Learning to be” (1972) states that: “Very many countries regard the education of modern man as important”. And for all those who want to make the world a better place and to prepare for the future, education is a capital, universal subject”. While the 20th century administered quite a few shocks to the educational system and exposed its weaknesses and inadequacies in the context of the fast changing world, the current millennium is expected to be full of such innumerable shocks as would compel the seats of learning to redesign themselves to update their curricula as well as teaching styles and methodologies.

To put it in simple terms, all education will have to be linked to life. It would be targeted to concrete goals. A close relationship will be established between the educators and the latest social development in every sphere. Educationists would have to reshape the educational system that would be in harmony with the latest demands, urges, aspirations and expectations of society.

Progress in electronics coupled with the coming of computers is revolutionizing the infrastructure of every social establishment. Scientific discoveries are innumerable and have a tumultuous impact on the physical and social organizations of the human society. The new developments in the world of science, technology and electronics are creating shocking upheavals in cultural and aesthetic spheres, forcing rethinking and transformation in established values and ethics.

Past experience shows that teachers are slow to change. They remain orthodox unless their orthodoxy becomes a challenge to their very economic survival. The current millennium will have no place for such teachers who cannot agree to change themselves instantly. Today there is hardly any updating of the teacher's pedagogical

skills. In the current millennium the process of upgrading teacher's knowledge and competency will have to be undertaken almost every year. Not only this, the existing training system of teacher education will have to undergo a revolutionary change.

The invasion of information technology, networking and the sweeping changes it is bringing in the lifestyles and administrative processes cannot be underplayed. One could see learners encompassing all age groups engaging actively either through formal or informal modes of learning.

Globalization and Learning

How many academicians would be happy to see a student in the class with an MP3 player hanging on the front of their chest and the earphones plugged in to their ears as he or she writes in the class? Or how many teachers would like to see their students often look at their mobile phones in the class when you had specifically instructed them to turn off their phones? Welcome, not to tomorrow's classroom, but today's! The students are not looking at their SMS messages but are in fact using their PDA's or even the phones as their calculators or even as their dictionaries to help them in their learning process as their electronic guides in the process of learning! The institution for tomorrow will be diametrically different from the institutions of today. The teaching aids of the future will be highly sophisticated. Computers, rather super-computers, will become a common teaching-learning instrument, not only in the classroom but also in the home of the students.

In fact, the time is not far off when students will spend less time in institutions as against in front of a TV set or a computer or any other unforeseen gadget of educational interest. It is apprehended that teachers will lose their leading place in the learning experience with more and more students' googling for a myriad of answers and options. They will rather be faced with the new task of providing the students with a user's guide to the media. Educators should be allowed to explore through a variety of training and learning strategies to achieve the goal of preparing the student in all the three aspects of education-learning, understanding and assimilating knowledge. These strategies should include an emphasis on learning by doing. Students must be able to use the computer well; not just to browse through a myriad of trash websites but to be able to work on the system with competence rather than be intimidated on the challenge of having to live with the technology of today; Universities will have to tackle this issue which will be a big factor in the improvement of the quality of higher education in Thailand.

Many courses have remained the same for decades, because the allegiance to tradition is strong. The field of research is constantly changing, creating the need for a strong science and technology base. Yet the educational system stays the same. Not many are enthused to take research as a carrier. Yes culture changes slowly, but now change is imminently needed. More attention to

instruction rather than research is emphasized. So, teachers should bear in mind the cardinal role of pedagogy, while planning to retain ties to research. The motto should be: learn and apply not study and forget.

There is a general tendency on the part of administrators and educators for reducing everything to numbers, so that if we speak in quantitative terms or show statistical data, it is considered to be objective and scientific and if we do not use quantitative data, we are considered to be far from being objective or are believed to be subjective.

Western and Eastern Cultures

Thailand like most other countries is at the crossroads of globalization. Look at the students and their behaviour across the country. It is quintessentially eastern in their respect for the Guru or Kru. The way of greeting which is the traditional wai and the manner of bowing the head when they cross a person who is either a senior or older person and also their cultural inhibition to ask questions in the class which is borne out of a sense of respect for the teacher which makes them feel that the teacher is the fountain of knowledge and that he or she shall make no mistake. Contrast this vis a vis their habit of eating at McD or drinking coffee at Starbucks or their love for the English Premier League or the love for micro mini- skirts or strapless blouses and tops. The gross cultural change in the outlook to life with an attitude of living together with their partner consensually before marriage, the extremely high rate of divorce in the country and the casual habit of engaging in pre marital sex which has recently come down to the age of 14 years as against 16 years, 5 years before as found by Bangkok Post in their research. Thailand also has the weird distinction of being the world's fifth largest per capita consumer of beer in the world, leaving behind them a lot of western countries which are much colder than Thailand!!! Is Thailand east or west? Global...Would be the answer.

If the current economic green shoots in Thailand are to be sustainable, if it is to match its status as one of the world's democracies with a position as a leading Asian economy, it has no alternative but to develop a strong educational base starting at the school level and continuing on to the tertiary level with an emphasis on doing rather than telling and coaching which has for a long time been the pillar in the context of Thailand's education of intellectual capital. This may not be a daunting challenge as it looks, particularly if the current PM, the Oxford educated and affable Mr. Abhisit Vejjajiva has his way in designing a more meaningful academic curriculum starting from an overhaul of the school system.

Breaking the Cultural Barrier in the Classroom

"Culture is properly described as the love of perfection; it is a study of perfection". Matthew Arnold

Students should be taught and should also learn to develop their potential by asking questions rather than being culturally inhibited in the class room because of the

respect for the teacher. Teachers must also realize this fact and encourage students to come out of their culture barrier and engage themselves in learning which does not mean disrespect for either their culture or the teacher. Thai teachers must realize this and adapt themselves to the demands of a globalised learning world.

One often thinks of culture in terms of the “iceberg concept” commonly used in educational studies, with its small visible tip and huge mass below the surface. Most people tend to view only the surface aspects of culture — observable behaviors — sometimes known as the five F’s: food, fashion, festivals, folklore, and flags. But of course culture goes deeper than that. It is the other 95 percent below the surface of which one needs to be aware. New codes of ethical practice for academics have raised expectations of academic performance, despite the intensification of work and increased administrative and *performativity* demands. Student-teacher relationships have been customised, packaged and individualised, to become the product of both new learning technologies and market demand, where consumability substitutes for relationships based on intellectually and emotionally challenging pedagogical work.

The remaking of the academic in the image of the corporate university is achieved by exploiting the investment of the individuals in the institution — giving them the opportunity to shape up to the new culture — with the implicit assumption that they have the option to leave if not performing. There is less discursive space for voice; only exit or silence, the limited options available in market-oriented systems of education.

The knowledge economy is not only having an impact on how knowledge is valued but also on what kind of knowledge is seen valuable. Within the framing of the new economy, science and technologies are seen as more relevant and valued areas of knowledge than humanities and social sciences. New forms of *commodifying* knowledge objects marginalise academics that are not identified with new discourses of knowledge work.

Culture Learning From the Classroom to the World

“Culture is everything. Culture is the way we dress, the way we carry our heads, the way we walk, the way we tie our ties -- it is not only the fact of writing books or building houses”. Cesair Aime

Experience can be created through a teacher generated activity or from the student’s real life learning experiences. The experience generates the data, the basis of the culture learning. This part of an activity need not be very long and in fact, too much data makes it difficult to stay focused on the aim of the activity. Experiences may be varied and need not only be interactive group type activities. Reading an article, writing a story, listening to a lecture, or watching a video segment all provide valid experiences as long as students have a chance to interact with or react to the material at some point of time in the class. The best way possible would be in giving them a chance to share their cross cultural incidents both amusing

and shocking which may have taken place in their lives or those which they may have heard from family members and friends in the class.

More and more students are evincing interest in learning a foreign language. The reason — knowledge of local languages is far from being adequate, whether for higher education or for job prospects in a globalised world. Cutting across academic disciplines, students have started to realise the advantage of learning at least one foreign language in recent years. For many, knowledge of a foreign language is an “extra asset,” especially when it comes to employment avenues. While Chinese is the most favourite for many Thai students, languages including French, German, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese, Italian and Russian also find several takers. A cross-section of senior academicians feel multi-lingual skills are imperative for students in the present day scenario.

Establishing a multicultural learning community with respect for all cultures is ever changing and evolving. Students from across the world who come to Assumption University bring to the classroom rich cultural life experiences, so why not tap into it? This involves a continuous process of research on their lives both in and outside the classroom, coupled with one’s own interpretations and perspectives. The nuances and aspects of culture are complex, varied and changing slowly but constantly, but it makes the classroom a natural place to learn.

The students who come into the classroom each semester have such a variety of life experiences to share with the class. Looking at their cultural backgrounds with the “iceberg concept” in mind has helped to be aware of the aspects of their lives which are not visible at the surface. Developing cultural competence is a process of inner growth. In order for one to be as effective as possible with the students, one must continuously engage in a process of self-reflection. To be able to know others, especially the students from many parts of the world who have different religious beliefs, values, one must know the self. So the growth of a culturally competent educator starts there. One must look within for a deeper understanding of which one is before one can adequately address the needs of the students.

This investigation should include core beliefs, hidden biases and our religious perspectives. Developing cultural competence is also a process that comes with experience and engagement, and with sometimes painful lessons that highlight limitations and prejudices. To learn about the backgrounds of the students takes time and effort; it involves reading about their countries of origin.

The educational goal is to translate culture teaching into a culture learning experience for students. If a teacher consciously and conscientiously plan activities that proceed from experience through the various processing stages, there is a greater chance that culture learning will indeed occur. A careful choice of activities accompanied by heedful structuring has the potential to

decrease the uncontrolled variables and diminish discomfort for students- and the teacher as well.

For, culture learning has indeed been a conundrum rather indefinable in most societies including and not restricted to Thailand and Thai students; since students risk being over ridden by others in a global village where understanding cultures is becoming absolutely important in the context of learning and also for organizations.

In an expanded version of G8, which is now G20, which includes China, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Turkey, which is not only the West now, but, Asian powerhouses now determine what will happen in the world rather than being told by the West as in the past. This major shift in the economic wealth and global significance in Asia is amply demonstrated by how well Asian economies have managed to surge out of the global economic crisis much faster than the developed countries. This is reason enough for the Western countries to now look at the East to learn and respect its cultural mores and traditions, for this is indeed the Asian Millennium!

Yesterday's foes like India and China are today progressive partners not rivals, a fact which would have been unthinkable a few years back has become a reality. Many countries have broken the cultural myth which had surrounded them for over 4000 years and have managed to forge such a strong bond of friendship, kinship and understanding within a period of five years, to have reached bilateral trade worth over a billion dollars because they have learnt to respect each other's cultures deeply and are also sharing each other's values!!! If the Chinese dragon and the Indian tiger, with a population between them in excess of 2.5 billion people which comprises more than 42% of the planet's population, can be united in a mutually beneficial partnership and trade, why not the rest?

The global village poses more threats and challenges to present day society and the world of the future, therefore, all those who are connected with the learning process including administrators, academicians and educators need to carefully examine the changes in the world and design an educational curricula which would be relevant to the context of tomorrow's world rather than teach what was used for yesterday's world, if educators are to participate in and shape their future meaningfully.

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